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SUBJECT: KOSOVO: SERBIAN POLS DISTANCE SELVES FROM RADICALS

SUMMARY

1.(SBU) A range of Serbian political leaders reacted sharply to a suggestion by Serbian Radical Party (SRS) deputy leader, Tomislav Nikolic, that he and PM Kostunica had agreed to proclaim an "occupation of Kosovo" in the event that Kosovo is declared independent and to use "all available means" to defend Kosovo.. PM Kostunica has characteristically maintained silence in response to Nikolic's suggestion, although one of his close advisors made some inflammatory references to Serbia's right "to take back what is taken from it." The other major political parties have distanced themselves from the Radical party position. END SUMMARY.

NIKOLIC CALLS FOR "OCCUPATION" DESIGNATION

2.(U) After a meeting between Radical party deputy leader Tomislav Nikolic and PM Kostunica on Friday 2/10, Nikolic announced that he and Kostunica had agreed that any declaration of independence would be treated by the Serbian parliament as an occupation of part of the territory of Serbia, and "that the National Assembly would have to support all those who are obliged to take care of the territory of the Republic, and use all possible force and all available means so that the state of occupation should end." Nikolic also announced that the two leaders had agreed to call an extraordinary session of parliament after the Serbian negotiation team returns from February 20 talks in Vienna. Nikolic said that both President Tadic and PM Kostunica should attend the parliament session in order to report on the progress of the negotiations.

DSS REACTION

3.(U) The Nikolic announcement was widely criticized in public statements by most major parties. The GOS initially refused comment on the Kostunica/Nikolic meeting, but DSS parliamentary whip, Milos Aligrudic, called Nikolic's statements "bombastic" and accused the Radicals of "political marketing." Amidst criticism that Kostunica himself had not responded, the GOS released a statement on Feb 12, clarifying the long-standing GOS position that Kosovo is a part of Serbia under international law. The press release also referred to "unhelpful" statements about independence which "create an atmosphere of defeatism." A DSS spokesperson further clarified the party's position on Feb 13, saying the DSS is focused on how to keep the province part of Serbia, not on how to "name" its seizure.

4.(U) Other government parties weighed in more strongly against the Radicals. G17 Plus VP Cedomir Antic said emphatically that his party would not support a parliamentary declaration of occupation, but said it would respect the will of the majority if one were adopted. DS party whip Dusan Petrovic said it was not a good idea to discuss state plans in advance of negotiations, remarking that the current state of affairs in Kosovo was due to the actions of the Radical and Socialist parties. SPO Vice President Vlatko Stambolic said that Nikolic was expressing his personal view and that of the Radical party, and that it was "exclusively directed towards domestic politics."

5.(U) Responding to the intense criticism, SRS General Secretary Aleksandar Vucic attempted to clarify on 2/12

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that a declaration of an independent Kosovo as an occupied territory would be only a "proclamation of Serbia's disagreement with such a solution." "The proclamation would be a deterrent -- to make everyone think well before they go ahead with it, because they will know that Kosovo's independence will not be a lasting solution," Vucic said, adding that Serbia would "wait until the current power structure in the world has changed to reclaim our territory." Nikolic also denied that he wanted to go to war, asking, "why should a war be fought over your own territory?"

ARTEMIJE SUPPORTS "LIBERATION", SIMIC CALLS FOR REFERENDUM

6.(U) The only direct support for Nikolic's position came from the hard-line Bishop Artemije of Raska and Prizren.

Artemije told the BBC during a visit to the U.S., "Every state has the right to fight against the occupier to liberate an occupied part of its territory." PM Kostunica's Legal Advisor, Aleksandar Simic, was somewhat more veiled, telling RTV MIR in Leposavic, that Serbia retains the right to "get back everything that is illegally taken from us." Simic suggested that the question would eventually be put to the Serbian people in a referendum with one question-- "Are the citizens of Serbia prepared peacefully or by coercion, legally or illegally, to cede a part of their territory to the Kosovo Albanians?" Sanda Raskovic-Ivic of the Kosovo Coordination Center also suggested a referendum, "if things start to go badly for Serbia."

7.(SBU) Officials from ruling parties have told us privately they would try not to comment further on the Radical's statements. One official predicted that if the Radical party pressed a parliamentary resolution, none of the other parties would agree. Kostunica's DSS confirmed it would try to let the idea of a parliamentary session drop. One parliamentarian from an opposition party pointed out to us that, with 80 members of parliament, the Radicals were only four votes short of the required 84 members necessary to call for an extraordinary session, but that the Radicals had not yet sought signatures from any of the other parties to call for such a session. (Under the constitution, either one-third of MPs or the government can call for an extraordinary session.)

COMMENT

8.(SBU) We have seen this political posturing by Nikolic and the Radicals before, together with the half-hearted response from Kostunica and condemnations by the other democratic parties. The Radicals and the Socialists seek political gain from the Kosovo issue and will continue to seek opportunities to paint democratic parties as weak on a patriotic issue. END COMMENT.

MOORE